Crawling Back To You

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Crawling Back To You

by JortPendle

Summary

Four years after the war ends, Gale finds his way back to Bucky

Notes

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Chapter 1

The bar is busy tonight, laughter and conversation bouncing from the walls, filling the room with a restless, excitable buzz. Kathleen's eyes are animated and unwavering, fixed on John in the midst of the noisy hubbub. She hasn't taken her eyes off him since he ended up next to her at the bar. She's pretty, wearing a simple blue dress that shows off her narrow waist, the curve of her hips, her dark hair styled in shining waves down her back. He's seen her here before, seen the way her gaze follows him across the bar, dropping with a blush whenever he looks her way. Tonight, she'd been standing at the bar when John had gone up to order. He'd offered to buy her a drink, and she'd looked up at John with hope sparkling in her eyes. The kind of hope untainted by disappointment, the disillusionment of experience. It had twisted in John's chest, tight and uncomfortable, but he'd given her a smile, and ordered her a drink. He's been beside her at the bar since. Rosy cheeks and dark lashes, and a smile that she hides behind her glass. She laughs when John teases her, shifts closer to him. His hand's on her waist. He can't bring himself to meet her eyes. To see the openness within them, no tinge of wariness or trepidation. As he's draining the last of his glass, he notices her friend Sandra making her way towards them through the crowd.

"Henry's ready to drive us back now," she says to Kathleen, her gaze flickering from Kathleen to John's hand on her waist. Sandra's smile is conspiratorial, her voice thick with the implication that maybe Kathleen would rather stay here with John. Kathleen doesn't say anything in response to Sandra; she's looking up at John with hopeful doe-eyes. She'd go home with John, if he asked.

He brings his glass down, empty, onto the table. Smiles at Kathleen. Her face lights up, just for a moment, before he says, "Let me walk you out," and stands up before he can glimpse the confusion in her expression. He walks them outside, into the cool night air. He breathes it in deep, exhaling the close, smoky atmosphere of the pub. Kathleen's waist is warm under his hand, soft and comforting. He wavers, for a moment. Then they reach Henry's car, and John steps back. Kathleen looks up at him one more time before getting in the car, her eyes hopeful, clouded by confusion.

“Maybe see you again sometime,” John says. Kathleen nods, over-eager, before she catches herself.

John turns away as the car starts up, walking back towards the ill-contained noise of the bar. He turns off into an alley just to the right of the pub, sighing as he leans back against the wall and feels around in his pockets for his cigarettes. The smile has fallen from his face, the muscles in his cheeks, his neck, aching in its place. He tilts his head back against the wall as he takes the first drag, looking up at the black sky. The stars are almost entirely obscured by cloud. It’s quiet enough that John can hear the sounds of the city, a faint, constant murmur drifting across the river. The smoke drags painfully in his lungs, the brick of the wall biting against his back. He breathes out slow, savouring the moment of stillness, a brief respite from the evening.

He’ll go back inside soon, and the boys will bombard him with indignant, disbelieving questions. They’ll have seen the way Kathleen was looking at Bucky. They’ll want to know why she left alone. Bucky’ll field their questions, fend them off with worn-in humour and barbs. But he’s tired of it. Tired of the monotony. Coming to the same pub, night after night, month after month. The same faces, the same conversations. Over and over again. No peaks or troughs in the landscape of his life. Just an endless, unremarkable expanse. It holds no appeal to him anymore; it had lost its draw somewhere between England and Washington. It’s just an echo of times past, a version of himself that Bucky can prop up for the night. He’s not sure who he’d be, if he let it drop. He draws in one last lungful of smoke, his stomach sinking at the prospect of going back inside, then stubs out his cigarette, and steps back into the bar.

He was right. The guys can’t understand why he let Kathleen leave. From the instant he sits down, they won’t let it go. He lets them get going as he puts down his drink, lets McNeill deal him into a game of cards.

“She was eating out of your *hand,”* Jackson says, his hand heavy and

sweaty on Bucky's shoulder. He's leaning too close, his words slurred.

"I tell ya, if a dame was lookin' at me like that, it wouldn't be her friend taking her home," Miller says from across the table.

"Dame looking at you like that?" Bucky says with an easy grin, shaking his head as he shuffles through his cards. "Now that doesn't seem too likely."

The table erupts with laughter, the focus shifting to Miller. John settles back in his chair, allowing himself to be carried along in the swell of conversation, half present under the dim lights.

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The walk home is blissfully quiet beside the broad river, the lights reflecting from its smooth surface. John puts his hands in his pockets, whistling absent-mindedly as he goes. He can see the rising shapes of the city on the far bank, the light glowing out into the darkness, reduced to pinpricks from this distance. This side is mainly industrial yards, a little housing, and further out, the base Bucky's stationed at. The river's noisy tonight, swollen from the downpour earlier in the evening. The puddles at Bucky's feet refract rainbow, oil-slicked from the bustle of production. It's peaceful here, at night. As the concrete sighs off the relentless busyness of the day and soaks in the tranquility of the cool evening air. It's not a long walk home. The sky is high and cloudy above him and the smell of oil and gasoline is softened by the rain, transmuted into something nostalgic that slips deep into his chest.

He gets home a little past midnight, the house silent except for the relentless buzz of the refrigerator. John ignores it, heading up the stairs as soon as he's closed the door behind him. The noise of the bar is still ringing in his ears, and his head feels a little fuzzy. He's too

sober though, and the tiredness seems to go as deep as his bone marrow.

The light in the bathroom is too harsh, a naked bulb John hasn't gotten around to getting a shade for yet. He brushes his teeth cursorily, and spits in the sink. When he lifts his head up, he catches sight of himself in the little square mirror screwed into the wall above the sink. His hands grip the cold porcelain sides of the basin, mouth turning down. He swivels his face slightly this way and that, observing the planes of his face, the stubble coming in on his jaw. His searching eyes catch on the lines around his eyes, his mouth. A shadow of the affection, the hope, that had for such a long time been present in his every glance, reflected back at him. A youth of mis-spent smiles. John's hands clench the rim of the sink, his knuckles whitening. He meets his eye again, a curdle of anger rippling through him as his jaw tightens.

He stays there, staring down the man in the mirror. The image of what he's become. Hostility, disappointment radiates from his eyes, a fury that sets them alight. In an instant, another image flashes through Bucky's mind. Gale, looking in the mirror as he brushes his teeth, in a bathroom softened by the care of a woman. Marge beside him, slipping her arm around his middle. A smile passing between them in the mirror. Fond, and happy.

Bucky bites back the acidic taste in his throat. He lets go of the sink and turns away, stumbling for the door. He pulls the light-cord violently and leaves the room. His knuckles are white, his hands cold.

He hasn't seen Gale since the wedding. Bucky doesn't remember much about the day. Just flashes of noise, and colour. The ache of the smile on his face, his collar too tight against his throat. The vomit between his dress shoes on the side of the highway. Gale, too pale and far too handsome, standing beside Bucky at the altar, the faces of the congregation blurred in a sea of joy. And the godawful, ripped open flood of pain that had ruptured through Bucky as they said their vows. The rupture that opens right back up every time he thinks of Gale. And he thinks of him too much. A bruise he keeps pressing on for fear

the pain will fade.

John strips out of his uniform, and gets into bed. There's pyjamas in the dresser drawer. He hasn't so much as unfolded them. His ma keeps buying him things she thinks he's missing for being single. He always visits his folks, rather than have them come here. His ma would only worry. She'd hate this house. The concern he hears in her tone every time she calls would bloom into panic. John's taken it as a bad sign that she's stopped asking if he's met anyone. Her concern has taken up residence in the silences between their sentences, somehow infinitely more suffocating than it ever was when she voiced it. John doesn't need his house to be homely, or well-cared for. He just needs somewhere to sleep.

His sister, Peggy, has visited. She'd poked fun at him, but she had looked a little worried. He'd hated that. There's nothing to worry about. He's fine. He's just a little more familiar with reality now. He stretches out his legs under the covers, the sheets cold against his skin as he reaches for his hip flask, sticking out of the pocket of his trousers on the floor. There was something beautiful, if fleeting, to delusion though, he thinks as he unscrews the cap. Soaring above clouds tinged golden by a far-off, setting sun. It's all grey down below, the air thinner. It's better like this. But John still misses it. Misses soaring. Before the fall.

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It's a typical day, midweek, when Bucky ends up at the bar again. His day had started early, eyes gritty with a tiredness that refused to be assuaged with any amount of coffee. A day like any other, putting the men through their paces, taxiing out, touching down. His eyes are still sore by the end of the day, the pull of home strong beneath his navel. The men are going to the bar. He wonders about just calling it a day there and then. The urge grows stronger with every passing day, sitting heavy in Bucky as he drinks with the others. But there's nothing to go home to. He may as well pass the time in the numbing noise of company, rather than sitting alone, in the contracting jaws of silence.

They get their normal table in the corner, settling in for the evening. The bar fills up quickly, the low murmur of conversation turning into a deafening wave. The first drink doesn't do too much to liven him up. He joins in the conversation sporadically, watching the condensation on the glass melt beneath his hands. The men are discussing rank, promotion. Someone's in the running to become a Major. Bucky's glass is empty. He decides to get another, to head off the urge to crawl home.

He feels around in his pocket for his smokes as he approaches the bar. His order is half off his lips when his face slips, shock slackening his muscles. He stares. There's a man sitting at the other end of the bar. Bucky hadn't seen him come in, the table he was sitting at obscured by the crowd filling the small room. There's a toothpick in the guy's mouth, his hand around a bottle of ginger ale. It *can't* be. Their eyes lock, and Bucky doesn't think before he's striding over to him. His thoughts have barely begun to form again, knocked flat by the shock.

"Buck!" John's tone is delighted, his face split by an incredulous grin.

Gale stands up as John approaches and shakes his hand, his grip tight. "John Egan. How the hell are you?"

There's warmth in the pit of John's belly, the apples of his cheeks; he feels his eyes squint shut in a smile. He drops his hand a beat too late when Gale steps back, his heart thudding a little closer to his throat than normal.

"What brings you to Washington, Buck?" John says at last, incredulous. Gale's standing there, skin and flesh and heartbeat. Right there. As easy as if he never left.

“I’m visiting an old buddy.”

“Well no shit,” John grins. “I’m stationed at the base right down the road.”

A slow smile grows on Gale’s face that John can’t quite read. “Well how about that.”

They stand there for a beat, looking at each other. Bucky can’t dampen the excited smile on his face, and he flounders for words. Gale looks as opaque as ever. Upright and collected against it all.

“I’m here with some boys from the base – you got time for another?”

Gale seems to consider for a half second. “Sure.”

Bucky orders himself another whiskey, and a ginger ale for Buck. He keeps glancing to the side to see Gale standing there, right next to him. As if it’s a given. And every time he sees Gale there, the smile that had leapt onto Bucky’s face as soon as he saw Gale grows again, creeping across his face. He leads Gale through the crowded bar to the table, drinks in hand. He keeps having to fight the urge to look back at him. As if somehow, Gale might dematerialise between the bar and the table. The boys from base are engaged in some raucous discussion, falling about laughing.

“Boys, make some room,” Bucky says. The men straighten up and shuffle along. Bucky puts their drinks down on the table and sits. Gale follows, taking a seat opposite Bucky. He has that smile on his face, the half-amused one that makes him look perfectly at ease. A smile Bucky has seen him wear a thousand times. The sight of it sends a searing pain fleetingly through the high. Bucky swallows it down, settling into his seat. “This is my buddy Buck. We served together

back in ‘43.”

“You flew missions over Germany?” Herman asks eagerly, his eyes wide and fixed on Gale. He’s the youngest of the crew, a lanky, red-haired kid from Minnesota.

“Sure did,” Gale says, his voice low, husky. He’s sitting back in his chair, yet he still has that perfect, elegant posture to him that nothing seems to shift. He doesn’t say much – never did. You wanted to know something about Buck, you had to ask. And then he’d give you about three words back, always the perfect answer, but never the crux. Bucky had learned to read between the lines. To see that the ease was practiced, and that under the air of being calm and in control, Buck was wound so tight that he seemed perpetually primed to snap. It’s the same now, Bucky thinks. He still has that gravitational pull, that awe-inspiring quality. All the men are looking at him the way the new kids in the hundredth did. But the wound up, tensed part of Buck looks a lot closer to the surface. There’s a tightness to his shoulders, his hands, that makes him seem almost brittle.

“Hold on - ” Miller says suddenly, pointing between Bucky and Gale. “Bucky…and Buck?”

“Listen,” John says, a grin already growing across his face. “I was doing him a favour.”

Across the table, a bitten back smile rounds Gale’s cheeks. Bucky’s stomach turns over, warmth filling his chest. “I mean, this guy’s called *Gale* for Christ’s sake. And besides, he’s the spitting image of a kid I knew back home - Buck.”

It feels seamless, slipping back into a re-telling of the story of their nicknames. He must’ve told it a thousand times, back when they were on base together. And even though it’s been years, since they last told

this story, since they last exchanged words, Gale chimes in right on cue, as if it's as muscle memory for him as it is for John.

It's just like old times. Gale and John a double act, the others enthralled by their presence. It reminds John of when he and Gale first met at flight school. And they just…clicked. The other men treated them like they were leaders, gods. To be looked up to. People had always gravitated to John, respected him. He was loud and confident, and handsome. It came easy to him. But it was nothing to the *draw* that Gale seemed to have. He didn't have to say a word. John had seen it inspire borderline devotion. Everyone had listened to them. And while Bucky had never wanted to *follow* Gale, the draw was equally powerful. Even now. It's magnetic.

Bucky feels twenty-four again, sitting across a table from Gale, entirely consumed by his presence. The rest of the room fading to nothing, just background noise. Bucky's felt grey for years now. But the instant Buck walked back in, it's like a match has been struck.

The night wears on and eventually, the men from base start to leave, saying how good it was to meet Gale. Gale answers in his low voice, shakes their hands. Collected and calm as ever. Bucky's had a little too much. Got caught up somewhere between the giddy high of the past, and the sharp teeth of the fall. He'd tried to stay on the high, trying with each drink to climb back up. He doesn't want to look down. He knows what lies below.

When he sits down heavily with his last drink, it's just him and Gale at the table. The crowd in the bar is thinning out. It'll be closing soon. At the thought, something drops sharply in Bucky's ribcage. His high spirits have well and truly tumbled, soured around the edges. The easy back and forth they'd had when the men were there has fallen away, leaving behind an abrasive silence. Gale looks fine. A blond statue, so put together even in the dim light of the pub. Bucky feels exhausted, rotten from the inside out. He's sure it shows. He stretches out in his chair, plays with a scrap of label left on the table from one of the beer bottles. It's damp beneath his fingertips, saturated from an evening's spilled beer. He slugs back his drink stubbornly, despite the swell of

discomfort in his belly. He doesn't look at Gale.

A bell rings out, shrill in the receding bustle.

"Guess we better hit the road," Gale says, straightening his jacket. He's focused, looking down as he fixes his buttons. Bucky watches Gale's fingers, his eyelashes sweeping his cheeks. Then Gale's eyes swing up, and Bucky can't move. He'd forgotten the *power* in that.

"Sure," Bucky says gruffly, his stomach dropping as he looks away. They're leaving. Gale's leaving. John pulls on his jacket clumsily and makes for the door without turning back. Outside, the air is humid. Too warm to clear the haze of the evening from Bucky's mind. He ducks into the alley, lets his back fall against the wall. Too hard. He looks down, lighting a cigarette. His stomach is cramping, his mouth turned down. He coughs, his stomach lurching. He couldn't say goodbye.

When he looks up, a sharp pain bolts through his chest. Gale is standing beside him. Silent, silhouetted in the light from the street. "I guess some things don't change," Gale says. His tone sounds affectionate, amused. Something about those words has pain, and then blinding anger shooting through Bucky's chest in dizzying succession. He didn't change. He didn't move on.

"Guess not," Bucky replies, an acidic edge to his tone. He knows Gale can hear it. He doesn't know how to stop it. He doesn't want to.

"They seemed like a good bunch," Gale says, his tone as casual as if they're having a mundane conversation about the weather. Not as if he's just shown up here, with no explanation, after four years of silence. As if no time had passed. As if nothing had ever gone wrong between them. John clenches his jaw against the words struggling up his throat, and nods.

“You live nearby?” Gale asks after a few moments of silence.

John nods, inhaling slowly through his nose. Trying to quell the anger that’s rising in him as irrefutably as smoke.

“Walking back?”

“Yep,” John says. He can take a hint. Time to go. He drops his cigarette to the ground and pushes himself off the wall, a little harder than he’d intended. He stumbles.

Needles of pain and anticipation, shoot through him as he feels Gale’s hand on his elbow, steadying him. Pain palpitates in his chest, and he wrenches himself out of Gale’s grasp violently.

“Where’re you headed?” John’s words come out hollow.

“Think I’d best walk you back before I go anywhere,” Gale says. He’s looking at John, amused, as if he’s a child who’s misjudged how tired he is, and is now misbehaving. Another swell of fury beats at John’s ribs.

“I don’t need you to walk me home, Buck,” he says, the anger palpable in his tone. He lurches out into the street, his heart thudding. Gale looks at him sideways, and John’s cheeks burn with humiliation as he misses his footing. “I’m fine goddamit,” he snarls. The mass of hurt palpitating in his chest needs to burst. He wants to strike it into Gale, or hit something hard enough that he bleeds. He needs to split open, to bleed long enough that it all drains away.

“I’m headed that way anyway,” Buck says, his tone light but utterly immoveable. Then, “Jesus, Bucky,” as Bucky stumbles again. His skin burns at Gale’s tone, a sickly lump of shame rising in his throat. He looks down at the street, at the oil-slick refracting from the puddles.

“Leave it out, Buck.”

This just earns him another look.

“I’ve been fine, Gale. I’ve found my own *goddam* way home for years now, and I’m *fine* .”

Gale says nothing. There’s an acidic tangle growing in Bucky’s gut. The balance is tipping violently from anger to raw, humiliating hurt. He’s choking on it. He stumbles slightly on an uneven bit of concrete, and his breath catches as he feels an arm around his waist. He half-heartedly tries to shake it off. There’s a lump in his throat. It’s so familiar. Reminiscent of countless nights, stumbling home through the rain, laughing. He lets his head loll, leaning on Gale. He inhales, and the sharp-sweet smell of Gale catches in his nose. He’s not angry now. He feels sober. And so, so tired. His throat aches. He closes his eyes for a moment, lets his mind drift, and lets Gale guide him.

He feels as if maybe he doesn’t exist anymore. Here, he can close his eyes, breathe Gale in, even as it makes the pit in his stomach yawn and ache. If it wasn’t for the humidity in the air, he could kid himself he’s back at Thorpe Abbotts, Gale walking him back to the Nissen Hut. Bucky would be a little too sober to be leaning on Gale so heavily, saying things into the crook of Gale’s neck that made the skin beneath Bucky’s cheek heat up, made Gale’s voice come out a little lower.

Bucky swallows, his stomach tightening uncomfortably. He doesn’t want to have to step away from Gale, to open his eyes again for fear that the barely patched over wounds within him will open again. He

doesn't know how he lived through it before. That period of his life is a blur, mostly. But he's not sure he can take even the echoes of that pain. It grips him, intense, after feeling so little for so long. He'd got through it before blind drunk, fighting anyone who gave him half a reason. Fucked so many people he can't remember. He doesn't have that in him again. He's too tired.

He stumbles a couple of times, his eyes closed, and hears his breath catch slightly as Gale's arm tightens around him. Time is passing strangely. As if it's not moving at all. Bucky hopes the night will gape and swallow them whole; leave them walking like this forever. He doesn't want to have to feel Gale stepping away. To watch him leaving. He doesn't want to have to think, or feel the terrible queasy discomfort that's leaden in his stomach. Everything feels flimsy, breakable. An illusion, visible at just the right angle. This isn't real. Not anymore.

"I'm this way," John says quietly, lifting his head off Gale's shoulder and stepping away from him. He looks down, rummaging in his pockets for his keys. The familiar shape of the metal bundle in his hands is soothingly familiar. He tightens his hand around them, letting the metal bite into his skin.

Gale just nods, following along beside John like a shadow. With every step closer to Bucky's house, his heart beats faster. With every step, he expects Gale to turn back, to leave. He stays silent. As if, somehow, silence is the only thing stopping Gale remembering he doesn't want to be here, with Bucky. And Bucky doesn't want to break the spell. They reach Bucky's front door, standing at the top of the steps. Gale doesn't say anything. Bucky's heart is beating painfully fast, sweat breaking across his skin. He focuses on unlocking and opening the door with fumbling hands. He steps inside, turns on the light. Illuminating the empty hallway, the green carpet. The coat rack with just a scarf on it, the nails in the wall where pictures should hang. He swallows, turns back. "You want to come in?" He says it quietly, his heart in his throat. As if the quieter he is, the less the answer will hurt.

Gale nods, and steps through the open door. He doesn't fit in this small, empty house. Bucky leads them into the living room, and steps into the adjoining kitchenette, emptying his pockets onto the table. He goes back into the hall, mumbling something about hanging up his jacket. He pauses in the hall, leans against the wall. Tries to breathe. Then he steps back into the living room. Gale's by the table, looking across Bucky's kitchen, the plates stacked by the sink. It's disconcerting, jarring, to see him there. Bucky stops just inside the doorway, by the couch. He has no idea what to say.

"Nice place," Gale says, his eyes perusing the contents of Bucky's pockets, strewn across the table.

John half-laughs, and nods. He knows it's not a nice place. It does the job, but that's about all he can say. A stopgap that's stuck around.

"You live alone?" Gale asks slowly. He's picked up Bucky's hip flask, turning the battered silver over in his palm. Bucky's eyes catch on the movement, locking to the flask in Gale's hand.

Gale looks up at him, his eyes meeting John's for the first time since they left the bar. Bucky feels as if the ground is falling out from under him. He nods hastily, "Yeah."

Gale nods, his eyes preoccupied now, staring somewhere into the middle distance. He unscrews the cap from the flask, a measured, careful movement. Bucky stares, his heart-rate accelerating sickeningly. He doesn't know what's going on. Doesn't know what Gale's doing. He can't read it. Can't read the strange, faraway expression on Gale's face. He can tell Gale is turning something over in his mind. Weighing up his options. But about what, Bucky has no idea.

Gale raises the flask to his lips and slugs back most of the bottle. The

light catches across his throat as he swallows, muscles and tendons contracting under the skin. Bucky's staring, stays staring, as Gale screws the cap back on the bottle and sets it down right where it was before he picked it up. He's looking down at it, as if the battered silver is the most mesmerising thing he's ever laid eyes on. Bucky can't tear his eyes away. He feels as though if he rubbed his eyes hard enough, Gale would disappear into the popping lights. The whole situation feels surreal, alive only on the falling edge of a ridge of sand, in existence for only a moment. Gale, a hole in his life for the past four years is *here.* And maybe he's real, and solid and flesh and bone. But it doesn't seem that way. Gale in his living room. Gale *drinking.* Bucky's thoughts are disjointed, his mind scrambling to piece together some semblance of sense. It comes up short, casting around desperately.

Gale leaves his hand on the flask for a moment longer than he needs to, studying it intently. Then he looks up at Bucky, so sudden that Bucky feels his stomach drop. The look in Gale's eyes in one he's only ever caught echoes of. There's an intensity, a burning in his eyes. A hunger. Bucky's body reacts before his brain can catch up, an awareness zinging through him. A thrill of anticipation. Something heavy and unknown has settled across the room, thick in the air between them. Gale is still holding Bucky's gaze, the look in his eyes dark, fervent. And then something seems to drop within Gale, his stance changing almost imperceptibly. Whatever it was he was considering earlier, the decision's made. And then he moves. And Bucky doesn't react, except for his heartbeat, which seems to double with every step Gale takes. He crosses the room in a few strides, and Bucky takes a half step back as cool hands come up to either side of his face, and then Gale's body collides with him, knocking him back a couple of paces. Gale doesn't let go. His lips meet Bucky's: full, slightly spiced and still wet from the whiskey. The minute Gale had moved, Bucky's mind had gone into freefall. And at Gale's touch, something had cracked inside Bucky, long ignored emotion flooding him. It's resolution, relief. It twists inside Bucky, the elation of it somehow tainted, even as need surges through him.

Gale doesn't seem to notice Bucky's hesitation; he kisses him hard and intense in the split second before Bucky's hands come up reflexively, finding the slender, muscular warmth of Gale's waist and pulling him closer. He presses Gale as close as he can, feeling the heat of Gale's skin through his shirt. He doesn't want to let go. The thought of

distance between them again is sharp beneath Bucky's ribs, and he blinks it away, focusing on the feel of Gale's body against his, Gale's breath on his face. He's holding onto John so tightly that John wonders fleetingly if there'll be little bruised imprints of Gale's fingers on his flesh tomorrow. Proof that this wasn't all in John's head. Tuning out of his thoughts and into the reality of the situation is overwhelming. Gale's licking into his mouth, and Bucky's lips part with an involuntary moan. His body is reacting violently; a cold sweat breaking across his stomach, which is lurching with such sudden, intense arousal it's almost nauseating. It prickles down his spine, crawls up his throat, choking him. He feels feverish, shivery, an edge of fear razor-sharp in his stomach. He feels young, and confused. Vulnerable, and painfully turned on.

Gale gasps against his lips and Bucky groans, his hands on the small of Gale's back, pulling him closer. He backs Gale up until Gale's pressed against the wall, Bucky's hands stroking down the length of his back, holding him close, the space between them vanished. Gale's hands are sweating against Bucky's face, and he makes a low, cut off sound in his throat, one of his hands coming down to Bucky's lower back, his nails digging in. Bucky jolts forward, the movement pressing his cock up against the hard line of Gale's. The arousal rises in him so fast, so thick, that he feels knocked off balance somehow. Gale's outbreath is shaky, cut-off; both his hands scrabble at Bucky's hips, pulling him flush against Gale as they grind against each other, still kissing furiously. John's hands slide down Gale's waist, hesitate, then untuck his shirt slowly, hesitantly moving underneath to feel the soft, naked expanse of skin beneath the surface. Gale arches forward at the feel of John against his skin, and John slips his hands back out, reaching between them for Gale's buttons. His hands are fumbling, but then Gale's shirt is open, and Bucky's breath catches at the sensation of the soft skin of Gale's abdomen against his hand, the taut muscles jumping slightly under his touch. Bucky starts undoing his own shirt, practically ripping the buttons off before pulling it off, throwing it to the ground. He doesn't break the kiss. He doesn't know what will happen, in the instant when they break apart. He doesn't want to find out.

He makes a muffled noise, his hands slipping under Gale's open shirt, holding his narrow waist, pulling him close enough that their chests and abdomens touch. Bucky can feel how fast Gale's breathing, his

skin sticky with sweat. It's urgent, intense, building in Bucky so fast he can't get a hold of it. It feels as if it's happening on an edge, a hair's breadth away from a steep drop. Bucky's heart pounds every time the space between them fractionally widens. It's want, but it's need too. A need denied, and violently hated.

Bucky pushes Gale firmly against the wall, then brings his lips to Gale's throat, kissing his throat, licking at his pulse. The sharp-sweet scent of Gale is in his nose, in his mouth. Gale shivers as Bucky licks at his neck, his hands coming up to tangle hard into Bucky's hair. Gale inhales sharply every time Bucky moves his lips, his body reacting in jolts and shudders. Bucky's teeth scrape Gale's skin slightly, and Gale's fingers tighten in his hair, pulling him back, even as Gale's cock jumps. John moves lower, to his collarbone, tongue dipping into the hollow there, salt breaking against his tongue. He traces the crescent of the bone with his lip, breathes in the heady smell of Gale's skin. His hands are spread across Gale's shoulder, his chest. Holding as much of him in his hands as he can fit.

He bends down, feeling the muscle of Gale's chest against his lips, his skin almost burning hot. Bucky's hands are all over it, searching, feeling, mapping out his body. Finally allowed to touch. Gale's hands are still tightly threaded through John's hair as John's hands come to rest on his hipbones, and he slides down to his knees between Gale's feet. He breathes in beneath Gale's navel, tracing his lips lightly across the skin between his hipbones. The smell of him is stronger here, lower and slightly bitter. It makes John's mouth water. He looks up, and feels arousal drop within his stomach like a stone. Gale's head is tilted back against the wall, his eyes shut, colour high in his cheeks. His lips are swollen, still slick with John's saliva, slightly parted.

John stays unmoving for a moment, transfixed into stillness even as his cock throbs between his legs. Then he presses his lips into Gale's abdomen, feeling the muscle contracting as he starts to unfasten Gale's trousers. Gale's hold on his hair tightens. Bucky's heart is thudding. He leans close, his nose and cheek against Gale's abdomen, breathing in shakily, his lashes catching against Gale's skin as he closes his eyes. He lets himself breathe it in, just for a moment.

Gale's hips jerk forward impatiently, and his cock, still tented in his trousers, brushes against Bucky's throat. Bucky curses, his hand coming down to palm at Gale's cock. Gale bucks into the touch, his hips arching away from the wall. Bucky slides Gale's trousers and underwear down, his eyes taking in his golden skin, sheened with fine blond hairs that thicken as they go lower. He swallows thickly as the root of Gale's cock shows, and then the rest springs free.

John sits back on his heels, barely looks before he leans in, wraps his lips around Gale's cock. His cock is a hot, hard weight against John's tongue, the tip silky soft and salty. Gale doesn't make a sound, but his hips jerk as if he's been shocked, his hands tightening painfully in John's hair. John slides forward, Gale's cock sliding easily in until the head bumps against the back of Bucky's throat. Bucky's eyes flutter shut and he starts to bob his head, his tongue tracing over it, pressing against the sensitive underside of the head. Every tiny twitch of Gale's hips makes him hum, arousal shooting in sharp waves down to his groin. John doesn't think he's ever been this turned on, the throb of arousal heavy and constant throughout his body.

His hands are on Gale's thighs, steady on the muscle trembling slightly beneath his touch. John's gulping Gale down, saliva running down his chin, his lips suctioned tight around Gale's cock. When Gale's hands tighten in John's hair, try to pull him back, John pushes forward until his nose is pressed against Gale's abdomen. Gale's twitching, his breaths uneven, his hands restless. He sounds helpless. The arousal in Bucky is white hot, building with every stifled sound and movement Gale makes. John groans, and Gale inhales sharply, and starts to come, his hips jerking uncontrollably. John stays there until Gale's cock stops pulsing, then slowly pulls back and rests on his heels. He looks up at Gale. His eyes are closed, his shoulders relaxed, almost. He looks as if he's come loose. There's colour in his cheeks, and he breathes out shakily, a sigh of relief. He's beautiful.

John swallows. The heavy throb of arousal that had overtaken his body has petered out, replaced by the sickening, too-fast thud of his heart, reverberating in the hollowness. Gale's hands are heavy against

his head, his wedding ring an unpleasant ridge against John's scalp. John's eyes drop, looking at the green carpet, catching on his discarded shirt. He ducks out from under Gale and grabs it, sits down heavily on the far end of the sofa. His scalp aches, and his lungs don't seem to want to draw in a full breath. He pulls his shirt on violently, his hands shaking as he buttons it.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Gale fastening his own buttons with steady, graceful hands. He looks unruffled, just slightly flushed, with one strand of hair come loose, falling across his forehead. Bucky doesn't know what to do with his hands, He stares down at them, red and trembling on his lap. He winds them together, twists them apart. It feels as if reality is disintegrating. Everything Bucky had taken as a given these last four years was built on foundations that are crumbling. The night is catching up to him, dragging at the inside of his brain. He feels glued in place, unable to move against the waves of conflicting feelings washing through him. He feels sick, his stomach churning. He digs his nails hard into his palms, watching his short nails dig into the meat of his hand. Gale isn't saying anything. It's dead silent, except for the buzzing of the fridge, which only seems to amplify the absence of anything else. It's driving Bucky mad. He doesn't understand. But the scraping feeling in his belly knows what's important. Whyever it happened, whatever it *meant,* it's done now. Gale's life is with Marge. Far away from here. Four years might pass again before he sees Gale again. Or a lifetime. It isn't sitting right, in Bucky's gut. His mouth is dry, his ears ringing. He looks down, winding his hands together, then looks back up.

"Why are you here, Buck," John says, his voice coming out rough and flat. "Really."

Gale pauses, then moves carefully to sit down on the other side of the sofa. "I'm transferring to the base here in a couple of weeks."

"Here?" John's words are out of his mouth, disbelieving, before he can process the meaning of Gale's.

Gale nods, his hand folded neatly in his lap.

“What brought that on?” John’s half-laugh jars with his shellshocked tone. It feels as if there is a long shard of glass in his chest, sinking slowly into his belly. He can feel his heartbeat in his temples. John rubs his palms together, looks up at the wall opposite. There’s a water stain where it joins the carpet.

“Marge figured we could use a fresh start.”

Bucky’s leg’s bouncing up and down, a nervous habit he can’t shake. He’s buzzing with restless agitation. He stares at the opposite wall, heat and resentment and helplessness rising in him.

“Did you know I was here?” He asks finally, his cheeks heating up even as he says it. He shouldn’t have asked. He’s sick waiting for the answer.

“Marge heard from Crosby’s wife that you were out this way. And she figured, I’d be pretty happy to be back on base with you.”

“And you didn’t want to tell her any different?” Bucky’s teeth are gritted, his nails digging hard into his hand.

Gale seems to consider this a moment. “Well, we always got along pretty well.” His easy half smile is on his face now, a familiar, polished expression. Bucky’s chest aches.

Reality is flexing again, shivering into place and settling as if nothing ever moved. It makes sense, and yet – but Bucky’s thoughts are slowed by the barrage of information, the shock. He’s silent for a moment.

“You got a place?”

Gale shakes his head. “Not yet.”

“Marge send you to scope the place out?”

Gale inclines his head. He looks almost amused. “Something like that.”

John sighs. Looks down at his hands, slightly red in his lap. “When’re you leaving?”

“Tomorrow,” Gale says.

John nods, keeps nodding until he realises he needs to stop. Gale’s words are sitting at the top of his mind, refusing to sink in, to become real. His head is too full, but empty of any coherent thought. It’s numb, empty, buzzing. Then Gale stands up, a fluid, elegant motion. Bucky’s head snaps up to look at him.

“Are you going?”

Gale nods, and it feels as though someone sheared into Bucky’s chest, just below his heart. Whatever this is, whatever this *was,* it stops existing the minute Gale walks out the door. “You can stay, if you want,” Bucky says a little too hurriedly, getting to his feet. “I got a spare room, if you need a place to sleep.”

Gale gives John a cursory look, then shakes his head. “I’m alright, Bucky.”

“I guess I’ll see you on base, then,” John says, as they reach the front door. His voice sounds faraway. His body feels frozen, but he feels as though something important is slipping from his grasp.

“You sure will,” Gale says. He pauses on the doorstep, in the cool air. The trees opposite are whispering quietly in the breeze, the fields on the other side of John’s house stretching away in the darkness.

“Say hi to Marge for me,” Bucky says, reflexively, standing at the open door.

Gale nods, half smiles, and then he’s gone. A pale shadow slipping into the dark.

Bucky stands at the threshold for a moment, then closes the door. The paintwork looks too white, too bright in the hall light. Everything looks too vivid, and slightly different, the way it does after being out in the dark, and suddenly turning on a light. But his vision’s not adjusting. He goes back into the living room, his movements sluggish, as if he’s wading through glue. The silence is loud, disorientating, reminiscent of sitting in his battered fort on the Thorpe Abbotts runway, the engine finally quiet, after a day deafened by its roar, the blasts of the flak-field. As if his brain no longer has the capacity to comprehend silence, reaching, searching for something to fill the void. He looks across the room, the light yellow and bright in its fixture. It’s light enough that it could be day, except for the dryness of his eyes, the heaviness of his body. Everything looks wrong. It’s the same, but somehow now altered beyond return. It’s not the same room as it was when Bucky left this morning. He can’t shake the disorientation of Gale’s fleeting presence, his overbearing, heavy absence.

John crosses the room, and sits down heavily at the kitchen table. Looks out across the room. He finds himself drifting, eyes losing focus as he stares into the middle distance. The agitated, queasy feeling is accelerating through him, but there's no thought to anchor it too. It just rages through him, as John sits there, one thumb pressed to his lip, his elbow resting on the table. He reaches for the flask, but stops short, leaving it where Buck put it down.

The taste of the whiskey on Buck's lips flashes through John's senses; he closes his eyes, rubs at his temple as memories blink into existence, breaking free of their bounds. The flares illuminating the sky, the smell of gunpowder and kerosene in the cold English air. The war finally over; an elated, invincible feeling rising in its place. Walking back to the Nissen hut, and leaning in close. The taste of John's whiskey on Buck's lips in the fleeting moment that they'd touched. The dizzying smell of Gale's skin. And then hands, hard on Bucky's chest, pushing him roughly away. Staring into the disgust, the shame on Gale's face.

The past mingles sickening in with the present, conflicting with flashes of heat, memories of skin, and pleasure and lust. It assaults Bucky again and again, washes through him in waves. He stays still, too tired to resist them. It'll never end. Gale's coming back. It's all coming back.

Bucky snaps back into reality, the shift unexpected and jarring. The buzzing seems deafening, amplifying the agitation surging through him, crawling under his skin. He gets up before he slips back under, and rips the plug from the socket. The fridge stops buzzing.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John wakes the next morning with a start, his heart thudding. He blinks in the darkness, unable to make out his surroundings. The first vestiges of morning light are barely creeping around the sides of the curtains. He doesn't feel like he slept; it feels more as if he blinked, and woke up to find himself somewhere unknown. He's full of burning adrenaline, a pain in his stomach so intense that he'd be forced to double over if he was standing up. A feeling so familiar that had occupied him relentlessly in the months after he had left England. It had faded over time, overcome by apathy. But now the feeling is back so acutely that it chokes him. He blinks in the darkness, his hands twitching where they're resting on the covers at his chest. Slowly, his surroundings percolate. He's confused; it feels like waking up in Florida again, freshly back in the States after months on the other side of the Atlantic. It takes a few moments to remember where he is now. There's a momentary lull – and then the memory of last night hits him like a stone falling through water.

He freezes, an uncomfortable heat creeping through him. Vividly, he sees Gale, his back against the wall, eyes closed as his cock brushed against the back of Bucky's throat. The sound of Gale's breath stuttering as Bucky closed his lips around him. It stirs in Bucky's groin, even as his stomach lurches. He's out of bed before his mind can catch on the thought any further. It's a reflexive reaction; his need to get away from the thought is stronger than any rationale as to why.

He pulls on his clothes, and heads straight for the front door; he can eat on base. He stops short at the bottom of the stairs. It's unnaturally quiet; he can hear his pulse in his ears. He pauses, then steps into the living room, his footsteps cautious as if he's approaching some unknown, hidden danger. Waiting for the ambush. A soldier's instincts. Light is beginning to break through the grey dawn, thin rays slipping through the windows and casting shadows on the carpet at his feet. There's nothing out of place in here, nothing visibly amiss. And yet it feels as though there is something in the room with him,

lodged so deeply that nothing can exist in the space without its heavy presence taking up residence inside them.

John's things are still strewn across the table, his lighter catching in the morning sun. He crosses the room, keeping his eyes away from the space he and Gale had occupied last night. He pockets his lighter and cigarettes, and reaches instinctually for his flask – before drawing back as if he's been burned. Flashes of last night sear through him: Gale's throat, his tendons catching in the light as he'd swallowed the whiskey; the look in his eyes as he'd lowered the flask from his lips, breathing hard, his lips moist; the bruising press of his mouth against Bucky's, whiskey on his tongue.

John turns on his heel, leaving the flask where Gale had set it down. It hasn't left his pocket since '42.

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The sky overhead has settled to cloudy grey by the time John pulls up at base. The bumpy road out to it has John's stomach tight, last night's whiskey sitting sour in his gut, aching between his temples. He stays in the truck for a moment after switching the engine off, stifling a queasy belch against the back of his hand. His skin prickles uncomfortably, sweat breaking across his stomach as he registers the faint scent of someone else on his skin, warm and faded as if it's part of him. He drops his hand, and heads for the mess hall.

It's quiet at this time, just a few of the more senior men up early, reading newspapers. The cadets never rise until the moment they have to, but once they do, the hall will be full of noise, jokes, and stifled yawns. Bucky grabs a cup of coffee, turning away from the food. He finds a seat in the corner, someone else's discarded newspaper still on the table. He's the wrong side of warm, his sweat catching unpleasantly against the coolness of the air, his fingertips leaving dark prints where they rest against his thigh. Clearing his throat, he stretches out his legs to take up a little more room and breathes out

slow, feeling in his breast pocket for his cigarettes. He slaps them down on the table, downs the rest of his coffee. It lingers on his tongue, sour and filmy, as he grabs his jacket and heads out into the thin morning sunshine.

The air is sharp and fresh now, clouds moving in the breeze as John walks along the verge of the vast concrete runway. The air feels fragile, the tentative peace before a downpour. John can feel perspiration darkening his underarms as he lights his cigarette, the smoke catching in his throat. He usually walks this way after breakfast with the men, smiling crookedly around his cigarette as they laugh and joke around him. It's become a routine, a known. Something steady to hang his life around, as tattered as it was when he transferred here. His life here has been entirely separate from all the places he's been before. Completely removed from the versions of himself, the people, that he'd rather leave behind. Something he can count on.

He stops by the training building and sits down on the concrete steps, staring out at the runway as he smokes, his head throbbing. It's green all around the base here, trees lining the perimeter, lush and towering. It reminds him of England, sometimes. That and the rain. As he looks at the runway, an image of Gale heading for his fort, pale but determined under English skies, flashes sharply through him. He shakes his head, chasing the thought away. It shouldn't exist here, in the bland safe haven John has been clinging to these past three years. It shouldn't exist at all.

***

It's not an easy day on base. John had drunk more last night than he has in a long time, trying to drown the well of feelings that had surged through him as he'd sat opposite Gale in the bar. He'd kept going long after his stomach had turned weak and treacherous, his heart beating too hard through his shirt. The pain, and worse than that, the affection he still felt for Gale had barely been blunted by the deluge. He'd thought he'd ground that side of himself into the dirt years ago. But he'd mistaken distraction and avoidance for resolution. In all these

years, nothing's changed. Last night had proved that damningly.

By the time Bucky leaves base, he's exhausted. But there's a sharp-edged restlessness coursing through him that overwhelms the ache of tiredness in his muscles. It's been building all day, echoes of his days as Air Exec resounding through him jarringly. Pacing around the base, snapping at anyone who came too close. Going through the motions as his eyes drifted to the skies. Waiting, praying, that the boys, Gale, would touch back down. Sometimes, he wonders if that's what did it, back in England. The waiting. Every feeling thrown into sharp relief in the yawning moments that John waited on the ground, knowing that with every second that passed, everything might be lost. It had intensified every time he'd been left standing there, grounded against his will. Maybe this would all have stayed a spark, back in the States. Or maybe it was always inevitable.

When John draws up at his house, he can't make himself get out from behind the wheel. He sits in the dark in his driveway, staring up at the empty house. He wonders if Gale's home yet; he wonders what home is, for Gale. If it's Marge, in a floury apron, kissing Gale on his cheek in greeting, the smell of baking sweet in the air. A house full of warmth, the indelible marks of life and love. Memories embedded in the skirting boards like dirt, faded patches of wallpaper beneath sun bleached memories, carefully hung in frames. Gale knocking the nails into the wall, holding the spares between his lips. Marge leaning up, delicately placing the frames. A lifetime together, a shared past and future.

John starts the car up, and pulls back into the street. He can't face the silence.

***

The next few days are a blur. John becomes the life and soul again, after three years of playing it safe. He lets go. Drinks until he can't stand, laughs, sings and dances. A little too loud, a little too

aggressive. There's an edge to him that both draws people in and leaves them staring after he's gone. The boys love it, whooping and cheering at this new, unpredictable John. But with every passing second, John's agitation is growing, prickling across his skin. It sits heavy and spiky just beneath the surface. He's wound tight on base, trying to keep it at bay. Later, the liquor loosens him up. But it leaves him volatile. "Thought your reputation was bullshit," Miller had said, his arm round John's shoulders as they'd stumbled out of the bar. John had laughed loud. It was just like old times. Almost.

Ever since Gale showed up, John hasn't been able to shake the feeling he's stepped into the past. It feels horribly reminiscent of his early days in Florida, his first post after England. Back then, this feeling wouldn't have been amiss; it was his permanent state of existence. Every morning, he'd wake up almost feverish, his cheek stuck to the floor with sweat. A jagged emptiness in his gut, a feeling of loss edged with regret and relentlessly prickling anger. Barely conscious but kept awake by the raw adrenaline flooding him. Waves of nausea soaring through him as he traced the seam of the floorboards repetitively with his fingertips, trying to breathe. As soon as he was conscious enough to register reality, he'd peel himself off the floor, scrambling to move away from the hurt that always seemed so much closer to the surface in the morning, even as he shook, heart pounding so hard he'd feel like he was going to pass back out.

Back then, he'd been able to pound back as many drinks as he wanted and be practically as good as new by the next evening, save for the shaking in his hands. Now, tiredness sits heavy in him, his headache and nausea lasting well past noon. He can't sit still, either. He grits his teeth and gets through the week, rubbing his temples and snapping at the cadets. Despite his exhaustion, he's out every night after work at the bar; he can't stomach the idea of lying down in the buzzing quiet of his house, his mind left free to wander.

He'd crushed that habit out of himself years ago, pushed away every thought and feeling until nothing came up at all. Now, it's like the floodgates have opened. Gale, and a hell of a lot of other ghosts too. Every day he's on base, he sees kids that remind him of Curt, of Bubbles, of so many men whose names he never knew before they

were gone. He's been dreaming about the war again, too. He wakes up in cold sweats, blinking in confusion as skies full of burning forts dissipate into thin air. It's been years since he remembered his dreams. He'd learned a long time ago just how much liquor would reduce the night terrors to a dark, blurred sense of unease. As long as he didn't remember, he didn't care. But they're vivid again. As vivid as if he was there.

***

By Thursday, John can barely keep his eyes open on base, sinking cup after cup of coffee before the afternoon even hits. It only serves to amplify the adrenaline running through him, while the tiredness stays gritty in his eyes. He'd half heartedly promised himself he'd go home and sleep tonight. But Miller's just been promoted to Major. They're going out to celebrate.

They pile into the bar after they leave base, buying round after round for Miller. The agitation that has been present in Bucky since Gale left is sharpening, an inexorable undercurrent buzzing beneath his skin. The boys can feel it, as instinctive as dogs cowering away from an angry master. They laugh, but there's a caution to it. It has the anger growing to a thudding pulse within John. He sits in the corner, letting the conversation pass around him, sinking whiskey after whiskey.

A couple of weeks and Gale will be here. On base with them, at the bar with them, caught up in the good mood with the rest. And Bucky will have to watch. He can just about push away the memories and thoughts when it's just him, but if Gale is present, he's the centre of Bucky's consciousness. It's always been that way, ever since Bucky first met him.

The whiskey isn't doing its job tonight. He can't get Gale's face out of his head. Older, a little lined. But his striking looks accentuated, not dulled, by the years. Maybe things will be different now, what with this 'fresh start' Gale had mentioned, and the palpable tension in his

posture. Maybe things aren't going so well with him and Marge. Bucky smiles wryly at the thought. It's a hopeless path to go down. Gale and Marge. The perfect couple.

Bucky sighs, picking up his glass and draining the last of his whiskey. Rather than blurring his anger and frustration into something shapeless and feeble, the liquor is sharpening it. It pulses through his system in time with his heartbeat, the fatigue weighing down his limbs doing nothing to quell it. The whole bar is too loud, full of guys from the base and the yards cutting loose after a long day. John grabs his cigarettes, and gets to his feet.

"Where you going?" Miller yells as John gets up. His normally pale face is red, his tie loosened. The promotion has made him merry, and more than a little obnoxious.

"Next round's mine," John says as evenly as he can through gritted teeth. He heads for the door instead. He needs some air. His jaw hurts from being tensed all day. He'll step out, let his anger fade to a simmer. Or at the very least, until his hands stop shaking with it. For every person that brushes against him, John's fists tighten, fury rising in his throat.

The air outside is humid and close. It barely feels as if he's left the bar. John heads down the side alley, leans back against the wall and shoves a cigarette in his mouth, lighting it with practiced hands. The nicotine cuts through the jumble of thoughts in his head, but only serves to amplify his anger, razor-edged and surging with every beat of his heart. He sighs, rubbing a hand across his face roughly. He can feel the bitter downturn of his mouth, the tension around his eyes. He's full of an awful dread, an excited anticipation that's been burning through the background all week. The anticipation sends anger shooting to the tips of his fingers. Gale had been happy not seeing him for years. He'd chosen to leave Bucky behind, to move on. Maybe he'd have been happy never to see Bucky again. And here Bucky is, jittering with nerves and excitement. Waiting. It makes him feel like a caged animal, desperate to flee.

Noise swells suddenly through the silence as the door to the bar swings open. John leans his head back against the wall, hard enough that its rough surface grazes his skin. His jaw clenches, heart thudding at the interruption. The noise fades as the door closes, save for two voices. One low and gravelly, the other higher pitched and a little panicked. Something about the lower voice has Bucky stepping out of the alley before he can think about it, dropping his cigarette in the dirt.

Kathleen is trying to pull away from a tall, dark haired man. His grip on her elbow looks bruising. The anger in John spikes, no longer dragging him down. It's a surging, beautiful high.

"You doing okay, sweetheart?" John's drawl is lazy, but heavy with threat. His heart is pounding.

Kathleen's head whips round, and her wide eyes fix on John. The relief in her expression at the sight of him makes John's stomach tighten uncomfortably.

"We're fine, buddy, just keep walking," the guy says irritably, not looking up at Bucky.

"This guy bothering you?" Bucky asks slowly, not taking his eyes off Kathleen. The man lets out an angry snort and starts to pull Kathleen away roughly.

An elation, a dizzying, overwhelming current floods Bucky. He smiles, showing all his teeth, and steps forward.

***

The bar's noisier than it was when Bucky left, but it's not grating at his nerves anymore. Kathleen's curled up at his side, tucked under his arm. He's full of a buzzing warmth, blissfully free of any thought, just riding the current of conversation. His laugh's coming easy now, high on sharp-edged elation. His knuckles are cracked and swollen, stained red.

"You've got some kind of power, sweetheart," Miller says blearily, gesturing vaguely towards Kathleen with his beer. "I ain't ever seen Bucky in a worse mood than today. Then you come along, he's all sunshine."

John grins, his teeth showing. "I blame it on the poor company."

Miller laughs. Kathleen blushes, her gaze dropping to her lap. John pulls her closer, her hair brushing against his cheek. He breathes deep, the soft, floral scent of her catching in his nose. The boys get in a tangle trying to wrestle Herman's hat off his head, and in the commotion, Kathleen looks up at John with hopeful eyes. "It's getting pretty late," she says quietly.

Something bruised, reminiscent of guilt, flickers to life in his chest. He stands up, offers Kathleen his hand. There's a sinking feeling in him, cutting swiftly through the high.

"Alright boys, I'll see you sorry lot tomorrow."

Bucky puts his hand on the small of Kathleen's back, leading her towards the door. He ignores the jokes the boys are shouting after them. His smile fades as they reach the door, stepping out into the humid air. Kathleen stops, looking at him expectantly. Her eyes are wide, her expression soft. John's chest cramps in the moment before

he leans down, his lips meeting hers. He holds her waist tight against him, her body pressed up against his. He kisses her hard, letting skin and warmth and nerve endings take over.

He pulls back after a moment, his arms still round her waist. “Let me give you a ride home,” he says, his voice slightly rough. Confusion and disappointment cloud Kathleen’s face as John steps away, opening the passenger door for her. As he gets in and starts up the engine, he feels acutely aware that there are two of them breathing inside the truck.

“I didn’t take you for such a gentleman,” Kathleen says softly as John pulls out of the parking lot. The expression in her eyes is fragile.

A flash of tiredness so strong it almost incapacitates him hits and passes in an instant. He takes a breath in, and turns to look at her, a lopsided smile taking up residence on his face. Muscle memory. “Hoping I wouldn’t be, sweetheart?”

***

The kitchen tap squeaks to life, the room dimly illuminated by the light from the hallway. John fills a glass and drains it, fills it again, and puts it down on the table. He throws himself into one of the chairs with a sigh, and lights a cigarette, idly noting blood still congealed between the creases in his knuckles. He sits there a while, staring off into space. When he stubs out his cigarette, his eyes catch on his hip flask, still sitting on the table, dull in the almost darkness. He picks it up, his thumb stroking across the smooth silver, the rough patches of damage. He stares down at it until it’s warm in his hand. He sighs, tilting his head back to look up at the ceiling. Kathleen’s still upstairs, wrapped in John’s sheets. He puts his head in his hands. He’s spent all week running from himself, but right now he wants nothing more than to be alone.

He puts the flask down, and pushes himself up out of the chair, heading back upstairs. He's been gone long enough that Kathleen looks up at him with uncertainty when he walks back in. John throws himself down on the bed, hands her the water, and kisses her on the shoulder. He holds her close in the darkness, trying to find peace in the closeness, as her breath evens out and her body relaxes against him. It's a restless sleep, taken over by cloudy skies full of threat, and a terrible, yawning absence that aches all the way through him.

He wakes early the next morning, as light begins to creep through the gap in the curtains. His throat is dry, his muscles aching. Kathleen's curled in beside him, her arm draped across his chest. The anger and restlessness that has consumed him for the entirety of the week has vanished, leaving behind a throbbing hollowness in his chest that presses on his heart, his lungs. He tightens his arm around Kathleen, feeling the steadying warmth of skin against his, her body relaxed against him. The warmth of her touch speaks to something forgotten and unwanted in John, loneliness crying out from the pit of his stomach. A need he'd hoped was dead. It's been swooping down on him all week in the moments he'd lost focus, echoes of the dizzying intensity it had hit him with when he'd pulled away from Gale's grasp. Bucky's heart swoops at the thought, sweat breaking across his skin.

He gets up then, sitting on the side of the bed as Kathleen stirs. The sudden movement has him lightheaded. He stays there a moment, staring at the sunlight seeping through the curtains as the stars in his vision subside. He breathes in deep, right down to the sick knot in his stomach, and gets out of bed.

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The day grinds on at a snail pace. It's like being on the runway again under English skies, waiting for the clouds to clear. Saying a final prayer, and then another. Slowly being crushed under the weight of anticipation.

He wakes up pretty good when the CO announces at briefing that a Major Gale Cleven will be joining them next week from Nebraska. John's leg starts bouncing, and his fingers twitch towards his cigarettes. He twists his head round, stretches his neck, and sighs. All the anticipation solidifies, a leaden weight sliding to rest in his stomach.

"That your buddy from the other night?" Smith asks in a whisper, leaning over to Bucky.

"Just how many Gale Clevens you think there are in the Air Force?" Bucky says in a low voice, not taking his eyes off the CO. He's talking about something else now, but Bucky's mind has fixed on Gale's arrival. It has the weight of reality to it now.

The CO catches him after briefing and tells him Gale will be arriving Tuesday. He tells Bucky he gathers that he and Gale were old war buddies, and that they came with a hell of a reputation as a pair. He wants John to show Gale around base, make sure he has what he needs to settle in. Bucky nods, salutes.

John goes straight home after work, sitting in dazed silence until his sister, Peggy, calls. She wants to know what John's doing tomorrow. She wants him to come see her. It's the last thing he needs. She's too perceptive by half.

He tries making some weak excuses, but Peggy knows how to get round him. He ends up agreeing to go round, seeing as she needs some help fixing things up around the house. She knows John well enough to know he won't leave her to do that alone. So it's settled. He'll drive over to hers tomorrow.

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The day is clear when John sets out, the sun still low in the sky, a little hazy. It's a couple of hours to Peggy's, south of the city, in a little town in the mountains. She lives right by the forest, in a horseshoe town built around a vast lake. He keeps his mind on the destination, on Peggy and Johnny, her little boy. John hasn't visited since he helped them move in four months ago.

It's cloudy and grey when he gets there, but not altogether cold. Peggy greets him with a warm hug and a smile. There are roses growing in the garden, washing hung out neatly on the line. As she ushers him inside, Bucky hears a shriek of excitement. He barely sees Johnny before he barrels into John's legs. John lifts him high in the air, much to Johnny's delight. Peggy makes him a cup of coffee and catches him up on how things have been going before they make a start on painting Johnny's room.

"I'm gonna have to have words with Lee," John says, taking a drag from his cigarette before dipping the brush back in the pail of wallpaper glue. "Not taking care of fixing things up around here." He tuts. Peggy's husband travels for work, often away for a week here and there.

Peggy smiles, looking round from where she's folding clothes into a drawer. Johnny's in the other room now, sound asleep after getting very over-excited. "You know fine well the first thing out of your mouth when you see Lee will be about baseball."

John grins, turning back to the wall. "It's a nice place, Peg. You shoulda called sooner, I coulda helped you out with more."

They work in companionable silence for a long while, until Johnny comes back in, filling the room with noise and laughter again.

Late in the afternoon, Peggy marches John down to the kitchen. It's

warm, a sweet-scent in the air from the cookies baking in the oven. John scrubs the paint from his hands, wincing slightly as a couple of his knuckles split again. He sits down at the table, tired, but not in an unpleasant way. Peggy puts a plate of cookies in front of him, and a beer.

“And don’t you try to go back upstairs when you’re done,” she says firmly. “You’ll tire yourself out.”

“You sound like Ma, “ John laughs, ducking as Peggy smacks him with the teatowel. Johnny toddles in and sits on John’s lap as he eats, showing off his toy plane. When Peggy’s put him to bed, she comes back down and serves up the dinner which had been bubbling on the stove. They catch up as they eat, the sky outside falling dark.

“Buck’s transferring to the base,” John says, digging his fork into the last of the food on his plate.

Peggy looks up, her brow creasing slightly as her eyes meet John’s. “Buck Cleven?”

John nods, not quite looking back at her.

“Have you seen him since his wedding?” Peggy asks carefully.

Bucky shakes his head.

“What was that, ’45?”

Bucky nods. “He and the wife are moving over in the next couple weeks.”

Peggy nods, looking thoughtful. “That a good thing?”

John sighs, puts his fork down. He shrugs. “It ain’t a bad thing.”

Peggy is silent for a moment. She puts her fork down, and looks at him. “You can always transfer somewhere else, John, just remember that. Worked out pretty good for you last time.”

“Tryin’ to get rid of me?” John grins. The serious mood lifts as Peggy laughs.

They stay in the kitchen a long while, until John says he should get going. Peggy presses a paper bag of cookies into his hands when he’s trying to get his coat on. She asks if he wants to stay the night, says Johnny would be so happy to have him here in the morning. But John shakes his head and says he needs to get back. He kisses her on the cheek, and says he’ll see her again soon.

In the silence of his car, John breathes out, glad of the silence. Peggy’s house is full of warmth and love. And it’s suffocating. Creeping into all the places in John that love and care should live. Leaving him horribly of aware of what is absent from his life. He loves to see her, and Johnny. But it weighs on him, little by little. The bruise in his chest growing tender, pulsing as time goes on, leaving his smiles a little strained. But still, he feels immeasurably better for having come out here. He’s glad Peggy called.

The roads are near empty, the sky starry in brief glimpses behind the clouds. The interior of the car is cool and silent, and the agitation that has filled John since he saw Gale has somewhat abated. There’s still a

heaviness, a leaden presence, sitting within him. But it's settled.

He mulls over what Peggy had said, about leaving. John *could* move. He's done it once before. Fled the mess he'd made in the hopes he could shape himself into something he could stand to face in the mirror. He could leave, escape the past, the uncertainty, that Gale's arrival is churning up in its wake. He could move across state lines and oceans, far enough that he could stop wondering if he'd ever feel Gale's hands on him again.

He could bury it, and move forward. He could stop thinking about Marge and Gale, living together in a home. A marriage. Eating Sunday dinner, touching each other with casual affection. Maybe he could silence the violent twisting sensation inside him, every time he thinks of them. Or think about them little enough that it wouldn't matter. It shouldn't matter to him. It's been four years. Four years, he was meant to spend forgetting. Moving forward with his life. Bucky shakes his head, exhaling in an angry laugh. Great fucking job he's done. He should've listened, in the church, all those years ago. *Leave it, Bucky. Enough.*

Enough.

But Bucky is kidding himself if he thinks that running from this is an option. Now that Gale's unlocked that door, John will spend a lifetime on his knees, waiting for Gale to open it. He won't leave. Even if it takes him back to where he was four years ago. To the blackouts, the fights, and a pain all the way through him, so intense it felt like the very fabric of him had ruptured. Loyal to a fault, his Ma had always said.

John breathes deep, leaning back in his seat and watching the lights of the city come into view. There's a bittersweet clarity to it now, a steadiness in acceptance. He'll take anything, if Gale is the one giving. He doesn't *care* about moving on, or moving forward. He'd left, because Gale had told him to. But truth be told, Bucky could have

given anything up, if it meant being around Gale.

He feels a strange sense of homesickness as he pulls up to his house, and looks up at his porch, the rickety seat on it. The fields stretching away behind his house, the trees beyond that. He sighs, and goes inside, to the buzzing of his fridge, the too-yellow light. And he realises, as he breathes it all in, that this house has become *home.* He heads into the kitchen, grabs his flask off the table, and steps back outside, into the cool air. Takes a seat on the porch, and looks out into the night sky.

The truth is, John wants it to hurt. The pain and unease sitting in his gut these past couple of weeks has been, in a way, more soothing than any words could have been. It's a reminder of life, of love, of a person he thought he'd left behind. Gale's skin still awakens a well of grief in him, grief he'd carefully packaged and shoved as far down as he could. Not just grief for Gale and what could have been, but everything that had happened in the time he'd known Gale. Friends he'd lost, parts of himself that he'd lost.

John takes a swig of whiskey, his lip catching for a moment on the rim of the flask, thinking of Gale's eyes meeting his, dark and full of intent as he'd lowered the flask to the table. The sky is stained orange, the last vestiges of sunset bleeding into the inky darkness descending over the city. John breathes out, warmth against his moustache. The cold of the seat is seeping through his clothes, stinging at his skin. It's the first time in weeks he's been able to sit still, to take a deep breath. There's still adrenaline running through his system, but he can sit with it.

Gale's arriving in a couple days, and every time John remembers that, it catches in his chest. But he's stopped running from the truth that floods through him with every breath. He wants Gale here, he wants Gale as close as Gale lets him be. It doesn't matter if it hurts. John's used to hurt. It beats the nothing that's been buzzing through him, static in place of thought and feeling. Loving Gale had always hurt a little, at the edges. And then a whole lot, all at once. But it was the best John had ever felt. His best friend. The warmth of being *known.*

He remembers in the Stalag, one of the men from one of the other airforces had told Gale to “call off your dog,” as John had stepped in to defend him. And the savage, brutal satisfaction he’d felt in his chest at being *known*.

He stays out there a long while, watching the stars glimmer and hide, the clouds scudding across the shimmering sky. At last, he goes inside, toes off his shoes. He’s bone tired, from a sleepless week, a week of extremes and excess. He brushes his teeth then goes into his room. Turns on his lamp, and hesitates. Then reaches into the drawer for the pyjamas his Ma had bought for him. The material is soft against the rough skin of his hands. He pulls them on, and steps into bed. There’s a familiar ache beneath his beating heart. He hopes it never leaves again. He hopes he drank enough for a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

No Gale this time - but he will return in the next chapter! Hope you enjoyed, and thank you for reading❤ As always, feedback is very welcome, either on here or at my tumblr💕

Also big thank you to @heyitsluluagain for beta reading!!❤

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you @CosmicZombie for beta reading!!💕

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gale arrives on an unremarkable Tuesday in the middle of March. Bucky has known he was coming for the better part of a week, but when he walks into the mess hall and his eyes catch on the lone figure in the corner, his heart still cramps and stutters. Gale is pin-neat in a clean pressed uniform, his hair perfectly pomaded. His head is inclined slightly over a newspaper, an empty plate on the table next to him, a cup of coffee in his hand.

Bucky stops in the doorway, momentarily frozen. The early-morning light streaming through the window above Gale shines through his golden hair, illuminating it like a halo. Bucky stands immobilised as a shock of memories spark through his mind's eye, clouding the present. Walking through the doors of the mess hall in Thorpe Abbotts, a smile breaking across his face, utterly reflexive, at the sight of Gale already at the table. Gale, who was always out of bed the minute his eyes opened, as if the space between sleep and consciousness simply didn't exist for him. His face would soften at the sight of Bucky, tensed brow giving way to an answering smile that wouldn't shift no matter how hard Gale tried to hide it.

Bucky would be hungover, or still a little drunk and fragile. They'd both be weighed down by lack of sleep, the toll of the endless missions they'd been flying. The loss, of so many. But those moments, early in the morning – before the base erupted with activity and the pre-flight dread had set in – had been oases of sunlight in the darkness of the war.

Bucky's still standing in the doorway when Gale's eyes snap up to

meet his, and the memories evaporate. His eyes stay fixed on Bucky for a moment, his expression utterly impassive, although his jaw tenses slightly. Then he looks away, back down at his newspaper. In the light of day, he looks older, held tenser, the lines around his eyes set. Bucky heads over to grab a cup of coffee and a plate full of breakfast, then walks over to Gale's table as casually as he can.

He'd woken up this morning the way he used to before missions; a sudden snap into reality, energy surging through him while dread sits heavy in his stomach. He'd dressed quickly and driven over to the base early, trying not to think about whether Gale would be there, or if he'd be at home eating breakfast with Marge. The haze of confusion which has consumed him since he last saw Gale has lifted somewhat, helped by a weekend spent with Peg and Johnny. It had stopped him from sinking completely beneath the weight of his thoughts. He's still filled with uneasiness and uncertainty, but he's shoved it all into the cavernous part of his mind that contains so much of Gale, and the years they spent over in Europe. It exists beneath the reality that there is nothing between them. It gnaws at Bucky, and he can almost ignore it.

Gale's plate is clean, his knife and fork set neatly on top of it, when Bucky reaches the table. A bolt of anger goes through Bucky as he plonks himself down in the seat opposite Gale, taking up as much room as can in Gale's field of vision. After a considered moment, Gale raises his eyes to meet Bucky's. Bucky's stomach twists, and he shoves a forkful of egg in his mouth, staring Gale down with an obnoxious grin as he chews.

"Found your way here okay then, Major?" Bucky asks, his tone light and irreverent, the way he's always spoken to Gale.

"Looks like it," Gale says, his eyes twinkling. There's the hint of a bitten-back smile on his cheeks, and a warmth to his tone. But his eyes are so much more guarded than they had been those mornings when

they'd sat opposite each other in the mess hall at Thorpe Abbotts. It's as if Gale had been able to let whatever it was between them exist, as long as neither of them spoke it into existence. But Bucky had shattered it all, back in Thorpe Abbotts. Dragged it into the light.

Bucky's heart kicks at his ribs as he takes in Gale's clean shaven face, the familiar curve of his cheeks. He looks down at his coffee, trying to rein in the smile that feels so foreign on his face. He takes a sip, then fixes his eyes back on Gale. "I didn't count on company at breakfast," He puts his cup down, folding his arms on the table and leaning a little closer. "I figured you'd be in later, like most of the married boys."

Gale looks up at Bucky, silent, his expression inscrutable.

"Didn't fancy having Marge whip something up for you, 'stead of eating this crap?"

"Food here ain't half bad," Gale says evenly.

Bucky barks out a laugh. "Jesus, Buck, what were they feeding you in Nebraska?"

Gale's lips curve slightly, but there's no hint of good humour to his face. He looks tense. Any ease between them is a thing of the past. Even at the bar, their conversation had been carried by well practiced words and the company of others. Uncomfortable silence had swallowed it up in the end. After several uncomfortably silent moments, broken only by the scrape of Bucky's cutlery, Gale excuses himself to go see the CO.

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Bucky doesn't see much of Gale the rest of the day, which he spends distracted, his eyes magnetised to all the empty spaces that might hold Gale. His stomach is sour, squirming and uneasy. He doesn't see Gale again until the end of the day in the parking lot, where he and the boys have converged as they usually do. They're all gathered around Bucky's truck, talking about going for a drink, when Bucky spots Gale wheeling a bicycle towards the gates. His stomach clenches as Miller hails him.

"Hey, Buck! Buck!"

Gale looks round, his face hardening as he sees Bucky. He approaches them slowly, his knuckles white on the handlebars.

"Afternoon, boys," he says, his tone rough but steady.

"Hey, Buck, we're all going for a drink. Why don't you join us?" Miller says.

Gale is hesitant, saying he needs to get home, needs to help Marge out with unpacking. The boys do their best to persuade him, eager to get to know the infamous Buck Cleven.

"Come on, Buck, let them buy you a drink," John says at last, his tone cutting through the conversation. He flicks the cigarette from his hand, grinding it into the concrete with the heel of his shoe.

Gale sighs, his expression tight. "Bucky, you know I don't – "

“Let ‘em buy you a goddamn ginger ale, Buck.” Bucky says, reaching into his pocket for another smoke.

“Alright, boys. Just the one. I gotta get back.” Gale says.

Gale hauls his bike into the bed of Bucky’s truck while Bucky settles himself in the driver’s seat. He watches Gale in the rearview mirror as he waits, tapping his thumbs against the steering wheel.

“Marge got you on a tight leash?” Bucky asks when Gale gets into the cab, folding himself neatly into the passenger seat as though he’s trying to take up as little room as possible. “Been misbehaving out in Nebraska?”

Gale’s jaw clenches. “Plenty to fix up at the new place, John.”

Bucky can feel it, that limit, the hard line he’s pushed up against again and again over the time he’s known Gale. There’s a ripple of anger in his stomach, the magnetic urge to keep pushing. It’s a feeling that’s often lingered at the edges of their relationship, never as strongly as in the Stalag. Something caustic undercutting their easy familiarity. It feels petty, shameful. It sours the overflowing high of seeing Gale again. The feeling lingers on the ride to the bar, and follows Bucky inside.

It’s high spirits in the bar tonight. Gale graciously allows Miller to buy him a drink after a little back and forth. He sits himself down opposite Bucky, putting a toothpick in his mouth as his eyes steadily survey the room, taking everything in. They don’t stop on John for a second.

John fidgets with the lid of his beer, looking down at the table. Sitting here with Gale, memories keep rising to the surface, untouched for

years. Sitting in any number of bars, Gale opposite him, younger and fuller faced, his face straight but his eyes alight with humour. Every dame in a five mile radius would be giving him the eye. But his eyes would just keep drifting back to Bucky.

Miller plonks a ginger ale down in front of Gale, and Bucky snaps out of it.

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It doesn't take long for the conversation to circle around to the unlikely nature of Bucky and Gale's friendship.

"Now how in the hell did you two become friends?" Miller asks, his face pink and merry. "He doesn't drink, he doesn't like sport. Very committed to the wife." He shoots Bucky a pointed look at that last part.

"One of life's great mysteries," Bucky says with a wry smile, tipping back the last of his drink. "Ain't that right, Buck?"

"We sure are," Gale says good humouredly. The humour doesn't quite reach his eyes. His gaze stays on the table, somewhat glazed over. After a moment, he clears his throat, straightens his jacket, and gets to his feet. His well-practiced half-smile is back on his face. "Well boys, I better make a move."

"Better not keep Marge waiting," Bucky calls as Gale walks away. Gale doesn't look back. The empty space opposite Bucky is swelling, pulling him under. The conversation closes around the absence, and it's as if Gale was never there, except for the disappointment left curling in Bucky's gut. He stays for a couple more, then gets up to leave. The boys stare at him, surprised.

“What if Kathleen shows up?” Jackson asks, his tone mocking. Bucky itches to punch the smirk from his face. In the time since Gale was last in town, Bucky’s seen Kathleen more times than any other dame this year, and the boys haven’t let it go.

“She knows where to find me.”

Bucky’s smile fades as soon as the door closes behind him. Dust kicks up at his feet in the parking lot as he heads for his truck. The atmosphere feels heavy with moisture, a storm gathering. There’s a headache beginning to throb at his temples.

***

A little into Gale’s second month on base, an incident involving emergency drills and a panicked cadet lands him in the infirmary. Bucky hears about it in passing in the mess hall from Miller, who’s laughing as he tells the story. It takes everything in John not to throttle him. To demand that Miller tell him exactly what happened, and where Gale is. A panic, long forgotten, had gripped him in that moment. The helplessness of knowing Gale is hurt, and out of his reach.

It's late when Gale gets out of medical. Bucky stays on base, smoking by the side of his truck. The rest of the parking lot has emptied out by the time Bucky sees a lone figure heading for the gates.

“Need a lift?” He calls as Gale approaches.

He shakes his head. “I’m okay, John.”

“C’mon, don’t be dumb,” John says, on the verge of rolling his eyes. Gale is stiffly wheeling his bike along, his head held high. His leg must be killing him. “You’re not cycling Buck, get in the truck.”

“I’m doing just fine, Bucky.”

“Don’t make me drag you in here,” Bucky says casually. He doesn’t look straight at Gale as he says it, focusing instead on the cigarette in his hand. He takes a deep drag, then flicks it to the ground.

Gale shakes his head, and makes a sound under his breath that somewhat resembles a laugh. “You’re not gonna let this go, are you?”

John pretends to consider for a moment. “No.” He cocks his head to one side. “Get in.” He says it firmly, walking around to the driver’s side and getting in without looking back. He sits for a moment, then the passenger door creaks open and Gale gets in gracefully, cautiously, shifting slightly before settling. Knees together, hands wound tight in his lap, his head bowed as if in prayer.

“Thought I’d have to scrape you off the side of the road,” Bucky says, starting the engine.

“Yeah, well maybe I didn’t wanna deal with you bitching me out about it,” Gale says, his voice low and quiet, but with the same tone of their old back and forths. His cheeks colour slightly, as if the words have taken him by surprise. Bucky feels warmth blooming in his own cheeks, the corners of his lips turning up.

In the proximity of the car, the sharp scent of Gale keeps catching in Bucky’s throat. Somehow it’s sharper, more all-encompassing, from the rain. Gale’s hair is still wet, an almost tawny shade. His profile looks more defined, more delicate in the still of Bucky’s car, than it

had done in the downpour. Bucky's always been able to see the vulnerability to Gale, alongside his strength. He looks small in the passenger seat, layers of self-assuredness and control peeled back. It hurts, a homesick feeling swelling in Bucky's chest. He imagines for a moment keeping driving, past the city, out of state, until it's just them, everything far behind.

Bucky sighs, the nostalgic homesick feeling thick in his chest. It's moody out, dark clouds bruising the overcast sky. The sodden concrete almost looks alive. Hopeful, new somehow. Spring, in its fleeting green, is all around them. The field, the hedges, the forests lining the hills and mountains. Everything is green. Gale shifts in his seat, his hands still in his lap. He's still holding himself too stiff. Like he's not comfortable. With Bucky. That's like a shard of glass straight through Bucky's chest. Gale's eyes are fixed on the rain slick road. Bucky glances over at him. Sighs. Drums his hands on the wheel.

Sometimes, the weather here reminds him of England. When the air gets low and sweet, and dark clouds gather and swell, the vast open sky drawing in, the humidity growing like a restless pulse until the clouds swell and burst. It's the downpours that remind him of England.

They drive down the single lane road off base, surrounded by green bushes and fields. Fat raindrops are hitting the windshield, bouncing off the roof of the truck. Bucky glances at Gale. He's holding himself so tense it looks painful. His self-control used to look an awful lot like strength. Now it looks like he's going to shatter.

Bucky turns his eyes back to the road. Gale sighs. As the rain pounds down on the roof of the truck, Bucky wonders if he's thinking of Thorpe Abbotts too. The perpetual, overbearing hum of engines overhead, the smell of mud and gasoline thick in the air. He wonders if Gale's thinking of the time they'd cycled back from the village together, in a downpour like this. They'd tried to cycle up a muddy hill, a shortcut back to base, their thin tires struggling for purchase. They were soaked, uniforms clinging to their skin, their hair plastered to their heads. There'd been droplets of water on Gale's nose,

glistening against his golden skin. He'd still looked a little sunkissed, although it was fading fast in the English gloom. Bucky couldn't stop glancing over at him as they cycled, their thighs burning from the uphill battle. They were laughing, the sound echoing strangely through the downpour. Then John was skidding, his bike pitching sideways, leaving him in the mud. He'd arranged himself in a lounging pose, as if it was exactly where he'd intended to end up. Gale had dismounted his bike, holding out a hand to help Bucky to his feet. John had tugged on Gale's outstretched hand, his eyes glittering as he tried to pull Gale down into the mud. Gale was having none of it, and hauled John to his feet. He'd stumbled in the wet grass, not realising how close he was to Gale until he righted himself. He could see every droplet of rain, every freckle on Gale's cheeks, the bridge of his nose, his face luminous even under the suffocating grey of the English weather. He could feel Gale's breath on his face.

His eyes had been boring into Bucky's, the rare, extended eye contact making Bucky's heart speed. The directness of his gaze was dazzling, rare. It seemed as if they held some kind of question, some suspense that Bucky couldn't bring himself to break. His hand stayed on Bucky's arm, still, warm through the sodden fabric of his uniform. The air seemed to still, the world melting into nonexistence at the periphery. Only the space between them remained. It felt charged, magnetic. Gale's grip on his arm, no bravado, no pretence. But a silence, a disbelief. Caught off guard by the intensity of the moment. The droning of a fort, the bleating of the sheep, the biting wind against their sodden backs. John could've spent forever in that moment.

John sighs, and taps his hands against the steering wheel. "Never would've believed you'd move somewhere with weather like this. End of the war, all you could talk about was missing the sun."

And Marge.

"I guess it grew on me," Gale says after a long moment.

“Well, it’s a good town. Good folk too,” John says, pointless words to fill the gap between them.

“What the hell’d they let you move here for then?” The way Gale says it is reflexive, an echo of times past. There’s the ghost of a smile playing at his lips, his cheeks slightly pink as John laughs out loud, taken by surprise.

Gale’s hesitant directions lead Bucky to a cheerful residential street a few blocks away from Bucky’s. There’s a cherry tree in his yard, the lawn neatly mowed. Bucky tries to keep his eyes from staring too long, from trying to catch a glimpse at Gale’s life beyond the windowpanes. Gale gets out of the car quietly, thanks John for the lift, and doesn’t protest when Bucky tells him he’ll be there in the morning to pick him up. Then he’s gone, walking up to the house with as little of a limp as he can manage. Bucky stares after him for a long moment, the smile faded from his face, before he pulls away.

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One night, a rainy Friday in the middle of May, Gale comes to the bar with the rest of the boys after work. He’s always a little more inclined on Fridays. They’ve reached an equilibrium of sorts, a routine that Bucky can vaguely predict. Despite his leg having long since healed, John picks Gale up every morning, and drops him back after work. Gale’s always waiting out front when John arrives. Even so early in the morning, Bucky can’t help but smile at the sight of him. Gale gets in the car, bitches about John being late. John laughs it off, his jaw clenching as he looks at the neatly bagged lunch Gale’s carrying. He forces his eyes back to the road, swallows past the hurt in his throat. In the enclosed space of the truck, the piney smell of Gale drives the shard ever deeper in Bucky’s chest. Every morning, John waits for Gale to tell him he’s fine now, that he can make it to work on his own. Still, Gale hasn’t tried to start cycling to base again. A stupid part of Bucky, a part he thought he’d squashed out of existence, wonders if maybe Buck wants the excuse to spend time with him. Wonders if those moments they share together, alone in Bucky’s truck, are as vital for Gale as they are for him. Spending that time together, early in the

morning, in the mess hall at work, and on the way home, Bucky feels younger than he has in years, despite getting significantly less sleep.

Talking to Buck, being them again, makes him feel so young. Leaves him on a high as he drives home. All-consuming feelings, free of the overbearing weight of experience. Of not understanding how easily things change, how easy it is for people to walk away. Of not knowing how wrong you can be. Not knowing how it feels to be devastatingly, life changingly wrong. It had been years. Years lacking easy laughter, the steadiness of someone who had been there through it all. A constant for five years. An absence for four more. A gaping loss in Bucky's life that he could no more ignore than fill. He'd put up walls with everyone else who set foot in his life. But he left the wound alone. There was no need to put up defenses against someone who had walked away.

Every time he and Gale are alone, and it's almost like old times, he's soaring on a high. But then every time Gale makes his excuses to avoid coming to the pub, or leaves early, it bruises right against Bucky's beating heart. The disappointment never lessens, although Bucky has got better at ignoring it. Gale rarely comes to the bar, and if he does, he's guaranteed to leave within an hour. There's some small part of Bucky that's still hoping. He tries to drown it. He's been seeing Kathleen more. She's steady, and kind.

"Look who it is!" Miller crows. Bucky looks up, startled, from where he'd been absent mindedly watching the condensation pooling around Gale's thumb where it rests against his ginger ale.

Kathleen is standing by the sofa, looking a little uncertain. She's in a pretty, light blue dress, her hair done in perfect glossy curls.

"Kathleen!" Bucky exclaims, startled. He smiles at her, genuine and warm, and resists the urge to look across the table at Gale.

“Move up for the lovebirds,” Miller says, shoving Simmons.

Kathleen slips into the empty space next to Bucky, her cheeks pink.

“I didn’t expect to see you tonight,” Bucky says softly, resting his arm around her shoulders. He can feel the smile growing on his face as he looks at her. She’s flushed, her eyes bright, looking down at her lap to conceal her smile.

“I won’t be here too long – Sandy’s just got engaged! She wanted to come here to celebrate.”

“And look at you, all dressed up,” Bucky says, letting his eyes rove down her curves.

Kathleen blushes, leaning closer into Bucky’s side. “Who’s that?” She’s looking over at Gale. Bucky feels his heart somersault. With Kathleen generally arriving at the bar later, and usually only on a Thursday, she and Gale have never crossed paths.

“Oh, that’s my buddy Buck. He just transferred here,” Bucky says, glancing over at Gale. The words feel dry in his throat.

“Good to meet you,” Gale says politely.

“Buck – and … Bucky?” Kathleen asks, looking a little bewildered. Bucky grins, looking over at Gale, ready to launch back into another retelling. But he’s already turned back to his conversation with Herman, and gives no indication he’s heard Kathleen’s question.

Bucky's in high spirits tonight. Things with Gale have been going a lot smoother. He's starting to loosen up, Bucky really thinks he is. On their drive home on Tuesday, Gale had said in his low, even voice, that Marge wanted Bucky round for Sunday dinner if he could make it. Gale hadn't looked at Bucky. He'd just nodded sedately when Bucky accepted, and said Marge'd be thrilled. It feels like a window. A way back to how things were. Bucky drinks steadily, cosied up in the corner with Kathleen. She's in a giggly mood, blushing at his every comment. And Gale, although out of reach, is *there.* And besides, seeing Kathleen always brightens his mood. She's always so happy to see him.

As Bucky moves to get another drink, he catches Gale's eye across the table, and feels his stomach drop, uncomfortable heat rising in him. He freezes for a moment, caught in Gale's stare. His eyes are dark, locked on Bucky. His expression is unreadable, but there's an intensity to it that sends a jolt right through Bucky.

For the rest of the night, Gale's eyes barely stray from Bucky. He stays for another drink. And another. Somewhere down the line, his ginger ale is replaced by a beer. And another. His face is a little flushed, his actions seem that little bit less strictly controlled. Every time Bucky looks up from Kathleen, it's to meet that same dark expression in Gale's eyes, fixed on him.

After a long while, Kathleen gets up to leave with Sandy, and Bucky joins back into the conversation. The boys are making their usual jokes, but Gale is silent. There's a rising agitation in John, sparking higher every time he catches Gale's dark gaze. It's nearly midnight, hours after Gale normally leaves. Right around the time Bucky usually stumbles home, alone, to an empty house. Or, wrapped around Kathleen, the sweetness of her perfume catching in his throat.

Eventually, John can't take it anymore, his leg bouncing, his fingers fidgeting with his drink. "Alright boys, I'm beat." he says, his eyes flicking over to Gale. Gale's eyes follow Bucky fluidly as he stands up. His stomach flips.

“Think I’ll head home too,” Gale says, holding Bucky’s gaze for a moment before tipping back the last of his beer. “Night, boys.”

Bucky can feel his heart thudding in his throat when they step out into the oil-slick darkness. He breathes in deep, the faint taste of gasoline catching in his throat. The rain has mostly stopped, but the air is soft, the ground soaked from the downpour.

“Staying out late, what’ll Marge say?” Bucky asks smartly, lighting up a cigarette as they start to walk towards home.

“It’s Friday night.”

“Out late, drinking… it’ll be gambling next, Buck.” Bucky grins, suddenly alight with the fact he’s *alone* with Gale. Really alone. Gale shakes his head, cheeks rounding as he looks down. Bucky stares at his profile, the sweep of his lashes, then stumbles, swearing as he rights himself. He laughs loudly.

“You’re drunk, Major.”

“Looks like it,” Bucky agrees, his tone light.

When they reach the fork in the road where their paths diverge, Gale pauses.

“Reckon I’ll make it back in my sorry state?” Bucky asks lightly, coming to a halt next to him. Pathetic hopefulness swells in him, dampened by shame.

“I could use the air,” Gale says, his tone opaque.

Bucky’s heart is thudding dangerously fast as they take the fork in the road that leads to Bucky’s, walking along the dark streets in silence And then Gale’s walking up the path to Bucky’s house with him. The change in the air Bucky had felt at the bar is thicker now, almost oppressive. They stay in silence, Gale next to him on the doorstep. Bucky can smell the beer on his breath, feel the heat radiating from his body. A moth flutters off the door as Bucky pushes it open, blending silently back into the dark.

When Bucky steps into the hallway, Gale follows. Bucky’s sweating, his pulse rushing in his ears. No sooner has he closed the door than Gale is pushing him roughly up against the door, one of his hands under Bucky’s shirt, pressing hard into his abdomen, his hipbone. His other hand grips tight into Bucky’s hair as the wet heat of Gale’s mouth meets Bucky’s. Bucky lets out a surprised sound that lapses into a moan, and his hands come up to Gale’s back, feeling the warmth under his shirt, the way his muscles move as he kisses Bucky furiously. Bucky is overwhelmed, so close to being sated. It’s what he misses, what he craves beneath the surface, every hour of the day. Gale’s hold on him loosens, and then his hands are on Bucky’s belt-buckle, scrambling to open the fastenings.

Gale drops to his knees so suddenly that Bucky hears his knees connect with the floor. He feels the warmth of Gale’s breath through his skivvies, before Gale pulls him out, rock hard and leaking precum, and wraps his lips around him. Bucky curses, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. His hips twitch violently, and he can feel his thighs beginning to shake. It doesn’t feel like reality. This can’t be reality. It’s Gale. *Gale*. Bucky’s hand twitches up reflexively, then drops. He hesitates, then brings it tentatively to Gale’s head. Feels Gale’s hair soft against his fingers, the warmth of his scalp. Gale’s breaths are coming fast and harsh, and he shudders when he takes too much of Bucky into his mouth. But he doesn’t relent, his movement becoming smoother, less clumsy as he goes on. Helpless noises are twisting free of Bucky already. The intense physicality of it has overwhelmed all

conscious thought. When hears the wet sounds of Gale touching himself, Bucky's head falls back against the door, stars popping in his vision. Gale sucks at him, tongue brushing against the sensitive underside of Bucky's cock, then laps at it as Bucky twitches in his mouth.

A low noise, somewhere between a laugh and a moan curls in Bucky's throat. "Easy, Buck -- *fuck,"* he curses, as Gale descends on him, and he spills down Gale's throat, his body going numb, convulsing, fingers twitching. It's almost too much, his head thrown back against the door, his chest heaving. Gale's hand is still on Bucky's thigh, shaking, as he touches himself.

Bucky pushes Gale back, shaking as he lowers himself to the floor. On his knees, he presses his lips to Gale's, kisses him lazy and sloppy, hard enough that Gale has to sit back on his heels. Gale's panting against Bucky's lips, the sound making sparks of arousal prickle through Bucky, too much in the aftermath. It's a sharp, gasping inhale when Gale comes, his mouth open against Bucky's. He convulses against Bucky once, twice, then pulls away.

Gale's getting to his feet, tucking his shirt back in, fastening his pants. Bucky stands up, feeling dazed. He can just about see Gale in the darkness, so close that any movement would make them touch again. There's an electric current in the air, and Bucky can't breathe for wishing Gale would brush against him again.

"Think you can make it over for two on Sunday?" Gale asks, his voice rough and a little deeper than normal.

The gears in Bucky's brain grind to a halt. He nods, numbly.

Gale pauses then nods, reaches past Bucky and opens the door, the cool night air flooding in. "Night, Bucky."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took ages, but I hope it was worth the wait!

Massive thank you to all the kind people who have left comments/sent me messages on tumblr about this fic! Writing has been kind of hard recently but your kind words have really helped keep me motivated!

As always, I would love to hear any thoughts or feedback that you have! You can also find me on tumblr - asks and dms are always very welcome❤❤

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!